

A Leaf of
The Gutenberg Bible
(1450-1455)

1450-55

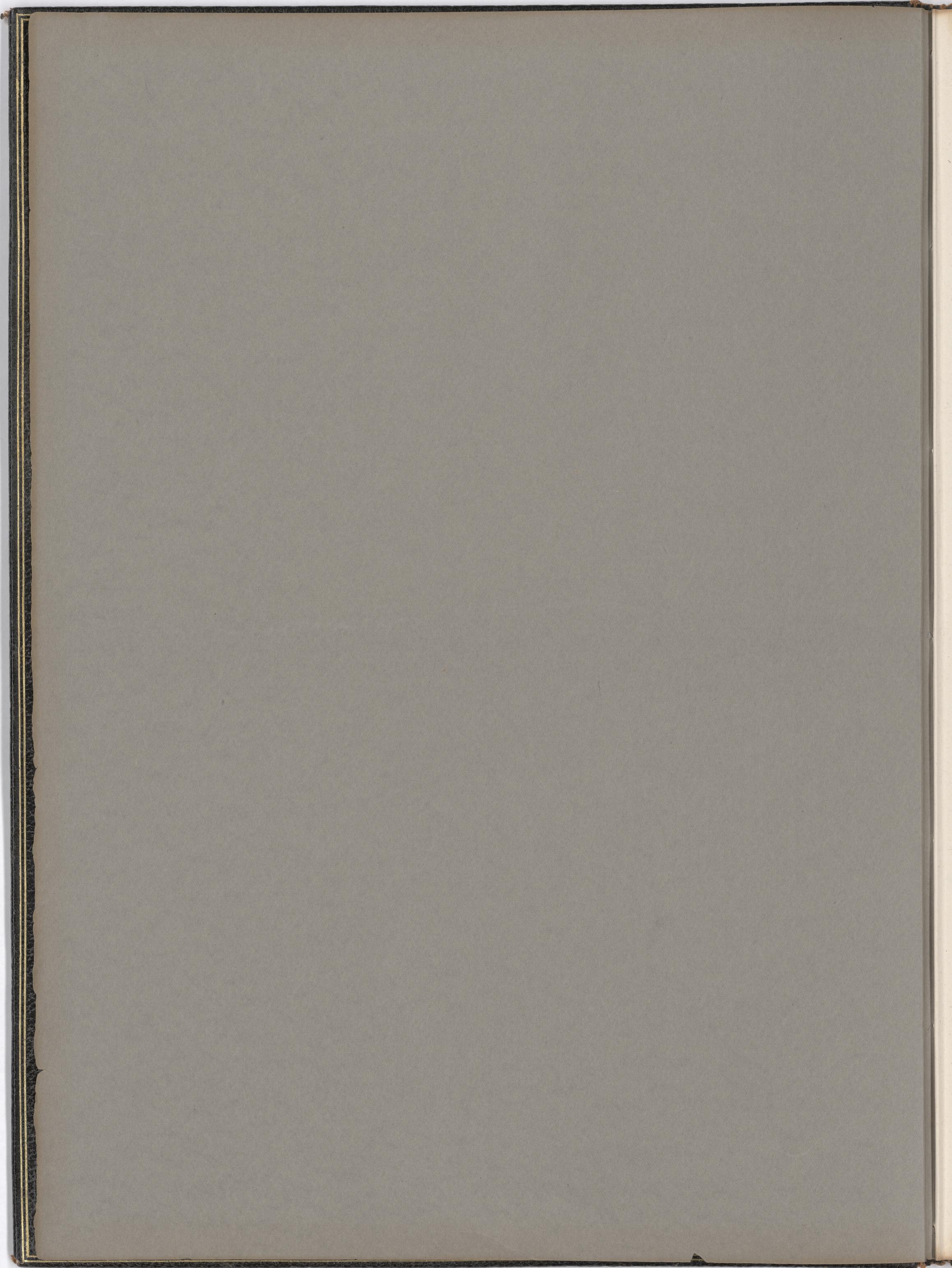
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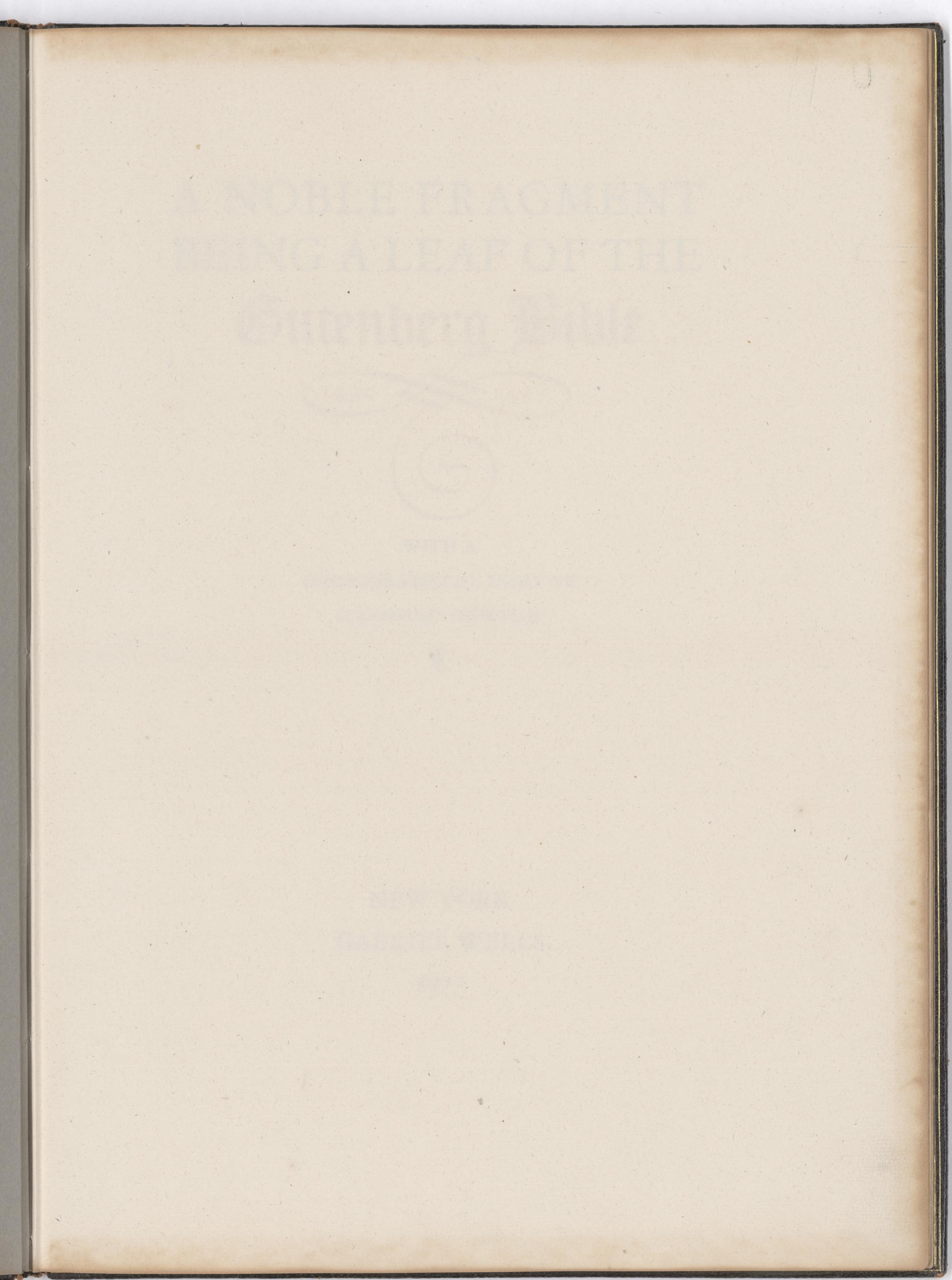


Journal

books

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A NOBLE FRAGMENT
BEING A LEAF OF THE

Gutenberg Bible



WITH A
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY BY
A. EDWARD NEWTON



NEW YORK
GABRIEL WELLS

1921

These preliminary pages were printed at the shop of
William Edwin Rudge, New York.

THE
ART
OF
DRAWING
WITH
A
BRITOGRAPHICAL
ESSAY
BY
A
EDWARD NEWTON

NEW YORK
GARRIFFE WEBB

1831

READER: pause awhile, for you look—and it may be for the first time—upon an actual page of a Gutenberg Bible, the most precious piece of printing in the world; and, admittedly, the earliest. Truly, a noble fragment!

Throughout the centuries the writings of scholars upon stone, upon clay, and papyrus, parchment, and finally, upon paper, had resulted in the creation of a caste: men who could read, men who, sitting silently before a written or painted manuscript, could follow in their minds the thoughts of other men.

Gradually, with the growth of learning, there arose a demand for books; but the method of producing them by means of a quill and brush made them so costly that they were the exclusive possessions of princes—either of the Church or of the State. Museums and libraries of the old and, to a lesser extent, of the new world now possess many superb examples of these books, the work of men who labored, it may be for years, over the production of a single volume. When we peer at the priceless treasures of the middle ages in museums, carefully screened with glass, we exclaim, "How wonderful!" And yet, wonderful as they are, they are as nothing compared with the printed page.

The story of the printed book, reduced to its simplest terms, may be briefly stated. Scholars are generally agreed that the art of printing as we know it had its birth in Germany. In the earliest examples of printing, not only illustrations, but text were cut in relief in solid blocks of wood, but it was not until the invention of movable metal types capable of innumerable combinations of letters forming words, that printing may be said to have come into existence. The honor of this great discovery has been by general consent awarded to Johannes Gutenberg. Of his life we know relatively little, but we know that about 1450 he was negotiating with one Fust, a goldsmith, for a loan to carry on his invention, and that a few years later there was a falling-out between the two men over the division of the resulting profits or losses;—meantime the great Bible was completed.

It is possible that before the work of printing so elaborate a book was undertaken, several minor attempts were made. Be this as it may, we are sure that the Bible was the first important effort of the great inventor; nor has another book yet been discovered in which he employed the types used in this Bible. Above all, as an example of printing, it has never been surpassed. Of all the arts, printing at its birth reached perfection more nearly than any other.

It has indeed been said that it is the only art in which no progress has been made: that the first example of printing is the best.

To Gutenberg is given the credit for the great discovery of this "art preservative of the arts." Fully five years were consumed in the printing of the Bible, 1450 to 1455 it is estimated; and the place in which the work was done is known to be the town of Mainz, or Mayence, in Germany.

A word as to the book itself. It gives no information as to the date at which it was printed, or the place, or the printer. It has no title-page or colophon; its six hundred and forty-one leaves are unnumbered, and there are no catch words to help us in collation. It is printed in Latin, in large Gothic characters, in double columns, forty-two lines to a column. In the very first issue of this supreme book—the issue from which this page is taken—the first few pages were printed forty lines to a column. After printing a few leaves, the printers decided to get more lines to a page and also to increase the size of the edition, which necessitated reprinting the pages which had first passed through the press; these pages have the full number of lines. Hence this Bible is frequently referred to as the "forty-two line Bible"; and it is also sometimes called the Mazarin Bible, for the reason that, while it was believed to exist, no copy was known until it was discovered in the library of the great French cardinal. The printing was done both upon vellum and upon paper; which was first used, cannot positively now be determined, but it is generally believed that the paper copies are the earliest. The page before you may, then, be the very earliest example of the printed page from movable type in the world—it being not only a page from the first printed book but a page of its very first issue.

The printing was done in imitation of writing (which it was at first believed to be), in a brilliant black ink of a quality which has defied the centuries. The paper, too, is of an exceeding beauty and texture. The headlines, the accents, and the illuminated initials, where they occur, are in every case supplied by hand, and in varying degrees of beauty and excellence. In a copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale, at Paris, there is a manuscript note in which the rubricator, *i.e.*, the one who did the hand illumination, says that he finished his work on the twenty-fourth of August, 1456, adding thereafter, as was not unusual, the word "Alleluia."

How many copies of this, the first printed book, were struck off? No one is in a position to tell with any degree of certainty. We do know the number of copies extant, and a very small number it is—much smaller than one might

reasonably expect in the case of a book that had been reverenced from the beginning. With a few exceptions, they are all in public institutions, mostly in Europe—many of them in imperfect condition, and all copies slightly varying. The Bible from which this fragment was extracted was itself imperfect, chiefly in that it lacked a number of pages. There were, too, a few pages from which some ruthless hand had cut out a number of the brightly colored initial letters. Where they occur, these pages have been so skillfully restored that only the most searching examination will reveal which they are. Had the book been perfect, or even had it lacked only a few pages which could be supplied in facsimile, as is usually done in books of great value, it would have been an act of vandalism to remove the leaves from the almost contemporary leather covers which have for so many centuries protected them.

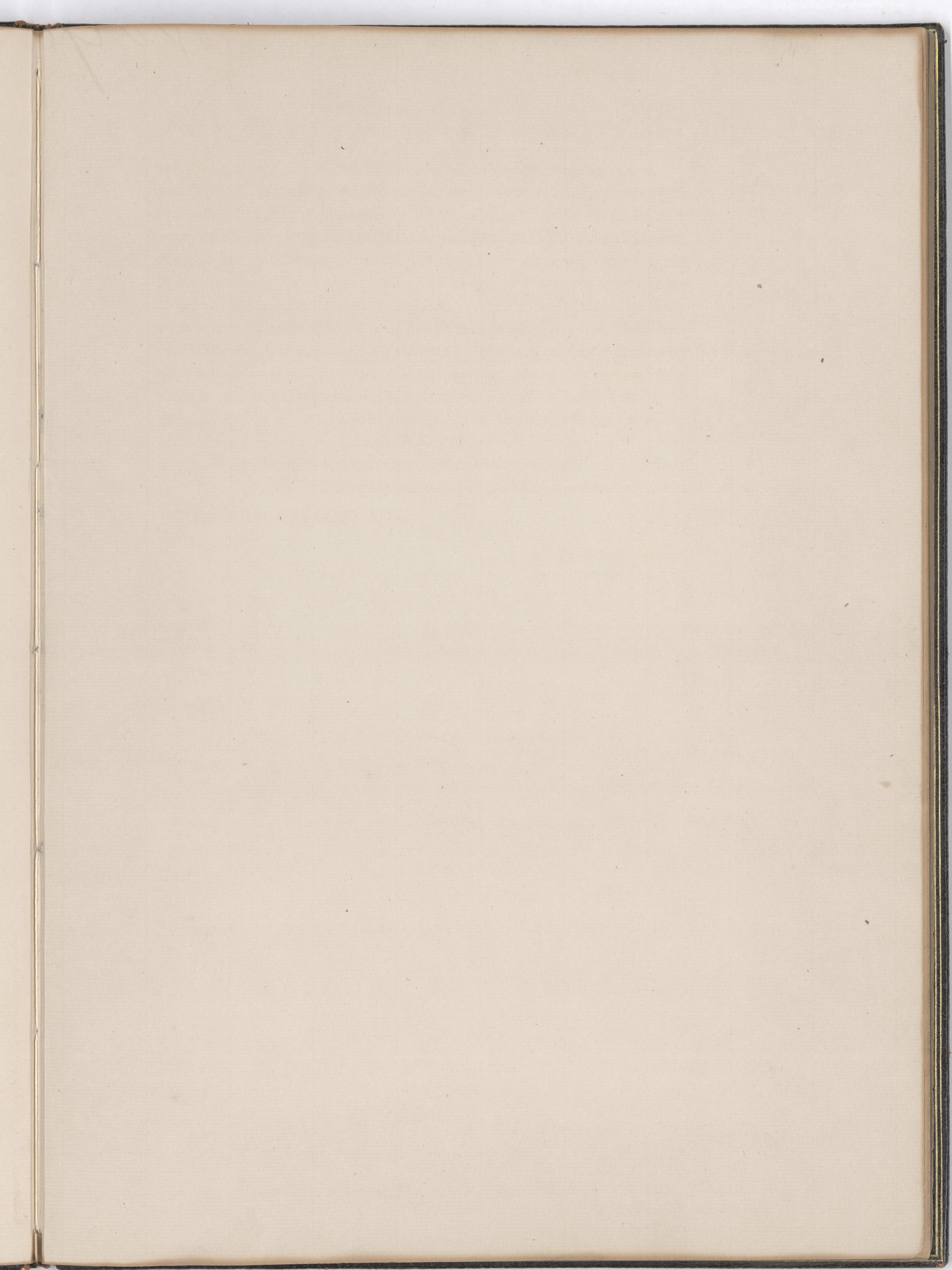
What is the money value of a perfect Gutenberg Bible? It is a hard question to answer. Mr. Huntington purchased through the late George D. Smith the Hoe copy for fifty thousand dollars. This was on Monday evening, April 24th, 1911, and for a time this was the highest price ever paid for a book, and I well remember the round of applause which followed the fall of the auctioneer's hammer when this figure, breaking all records, was reached. But we live in days when records of all kinds are easily broken, and should such an item again come on the market it might easily fetch several times this sum. Indeed, if we can imagine in the far-off future a Gutenberg Bible coming up for sale, some sagacious man of wealth or richly endowed museum might gladly pay a million dollars for it. Of its emotional value it is not for me to speak. It is, indeed, beyond words. Throughout the middle ages the most important book was the Latin Bible. It was regarded as a divine thing. Certainly it has had greater influence upon what we are pleased to call civilization than any other book.

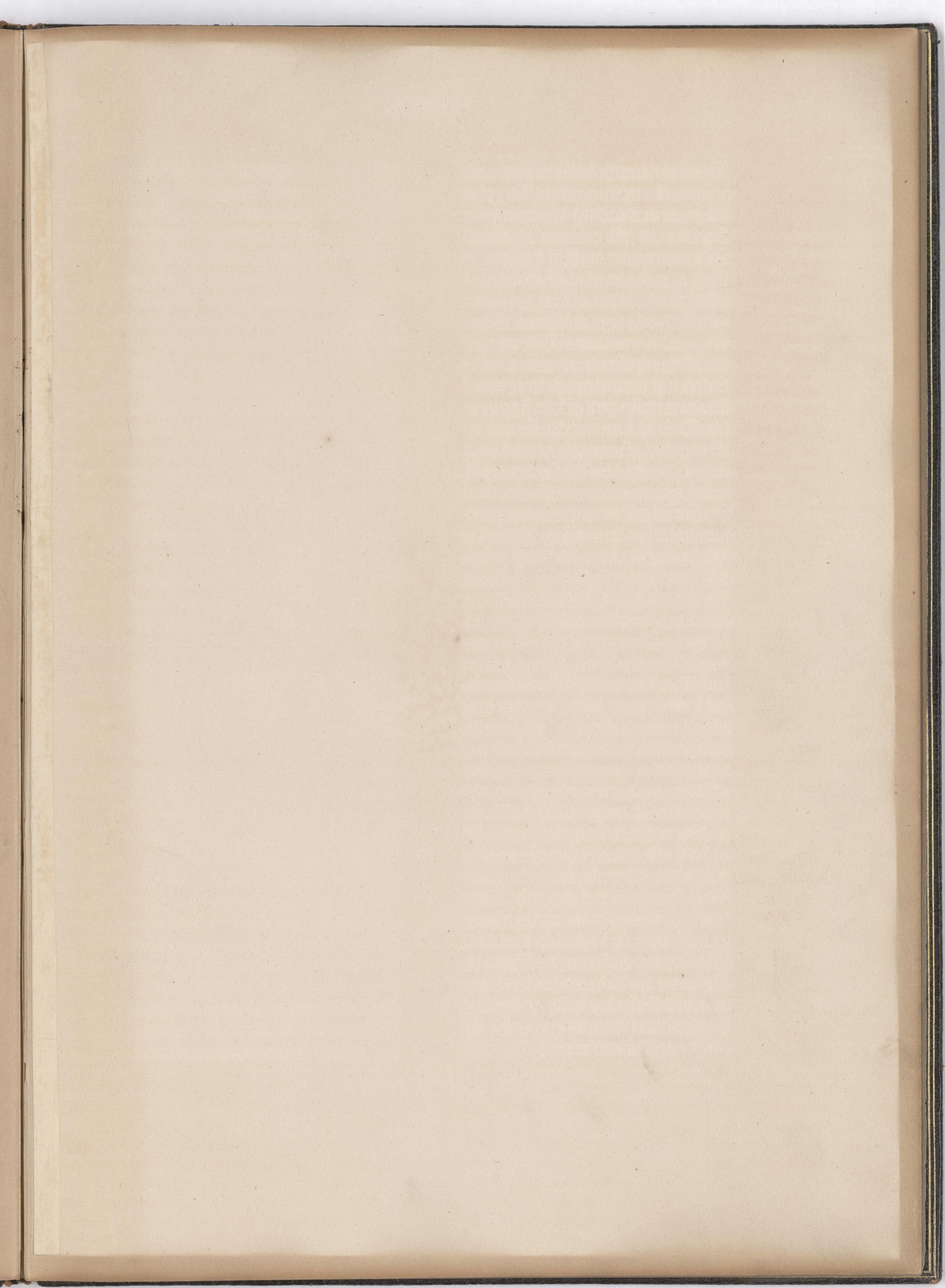
The first Gutenberg Bible to come to this country is the copy now in the New York Public Library, dispatched in 1847 from London by "Henry Stevens of Vermont" to James Lenox, who had instructed his agent to buy the book which was coming up at auction at Sotheby's, without fixing any limit. The result was that the book was purchased for him at the then "mad price" of five hundred pounds, which for a time so incensed Mr. Lenox that he was tempted to repudiate the transaction; but, as the narrator of the story says, he finally took the book home and lived to cherish it as a bargain and the chief ornament of his library.

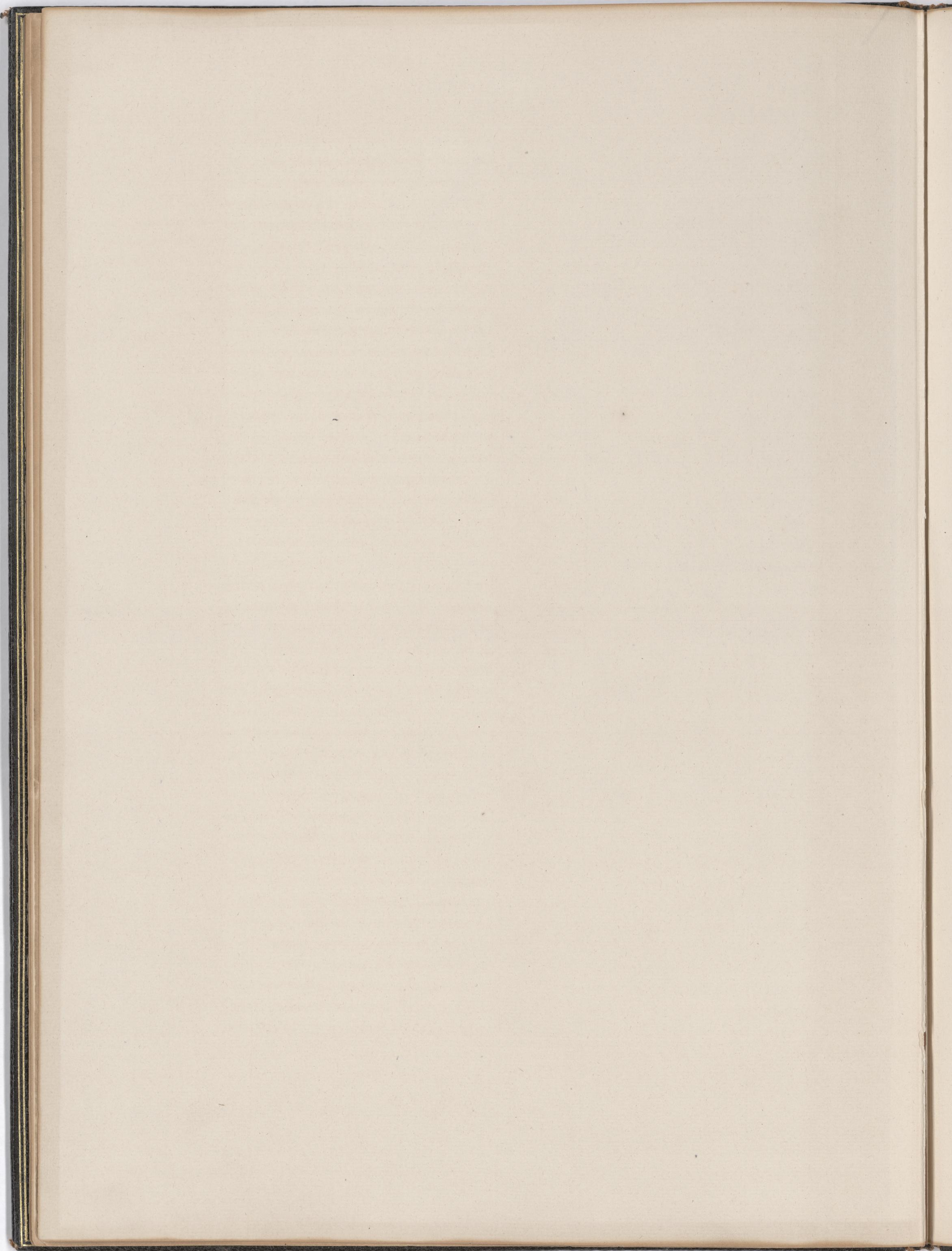
By a coincidence I own copies of the correspondence between the same Henry Stevens and another client, George Brinley of Hartford, Connecticut, relative to the second Gutenberg Bible to come to this country, twenty-five years later. How Mr. Brinley, "being as prompt as the Bank of England," took the prize away from the two Lords who wanted the book but had no ready money, need not now concern us. The point at which I wish to arrive is this: After an exchange of letters and cablegrams, Mr. Stevens secured the book, and dispatched it, insured against all "risques" to its owner with this note of comment: *"Pray, Sir, ponder for a moment and appreciate the rarity and importance of this precious consignment from the old world to the new. Not only is it the first Bible, but it is the first book ever printed. It was read in Europe half a century before America was discovered. Please suggest to your deputy that he uncover his head while in the presence of this great book. Let no Custom House Official, or other man in or out of authority, see it without first reverently raising his hat. It is not possible for many men ever to touch or even look upon a page of a Gutenberg Bible."*

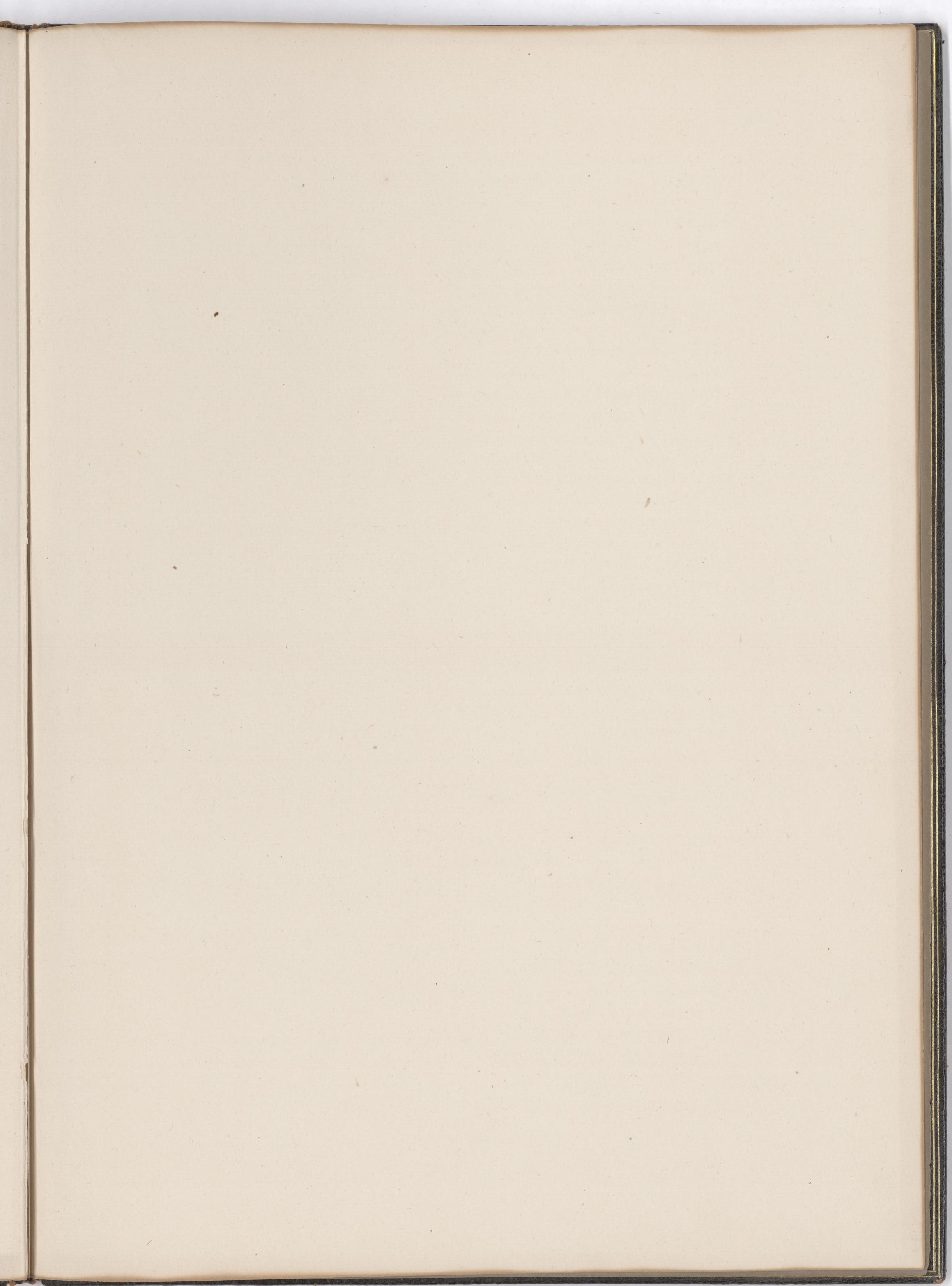
A. EDWARD NEWTON

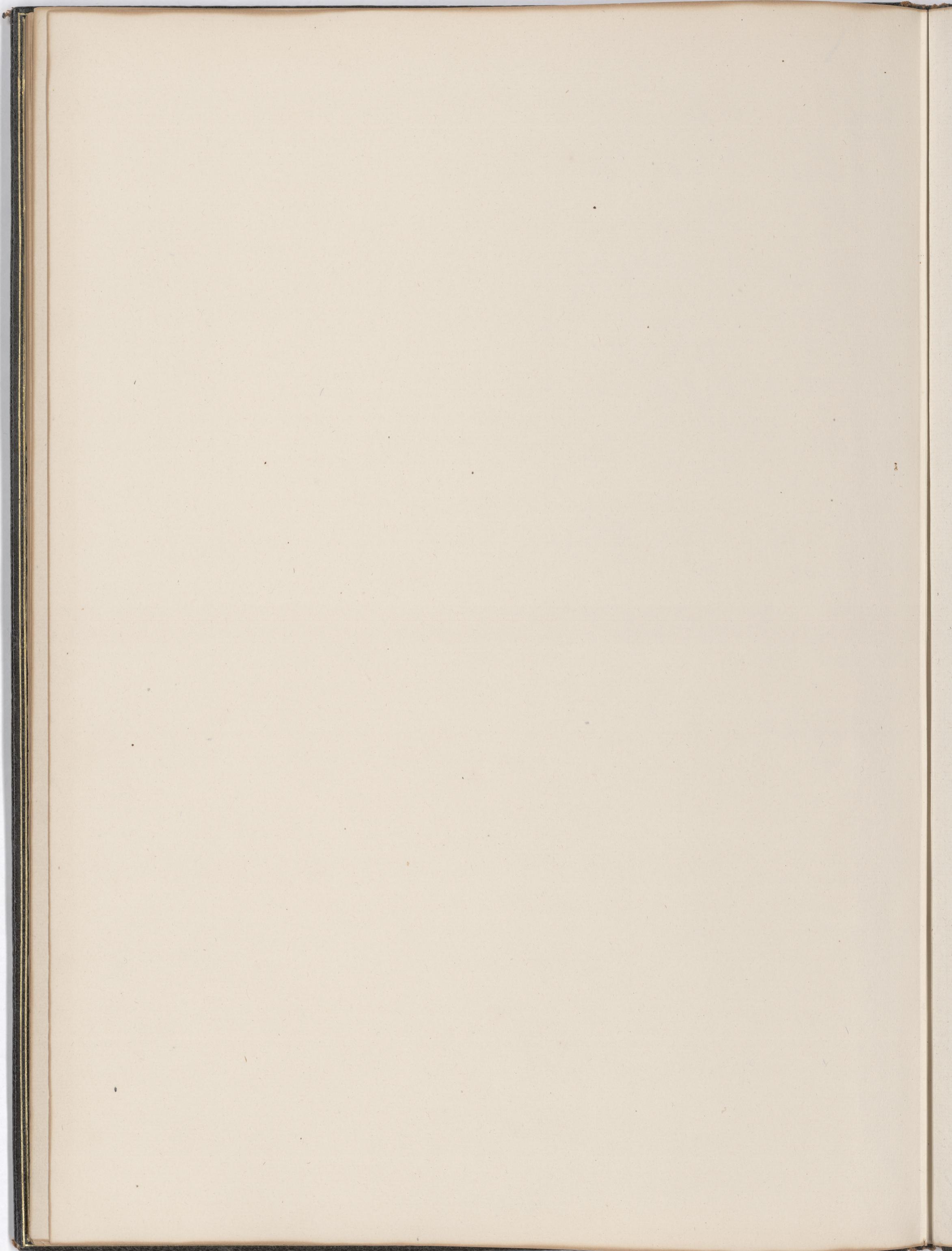
*Oak Knoll
Daylesford, Pennsylvania
October 25, 1921*

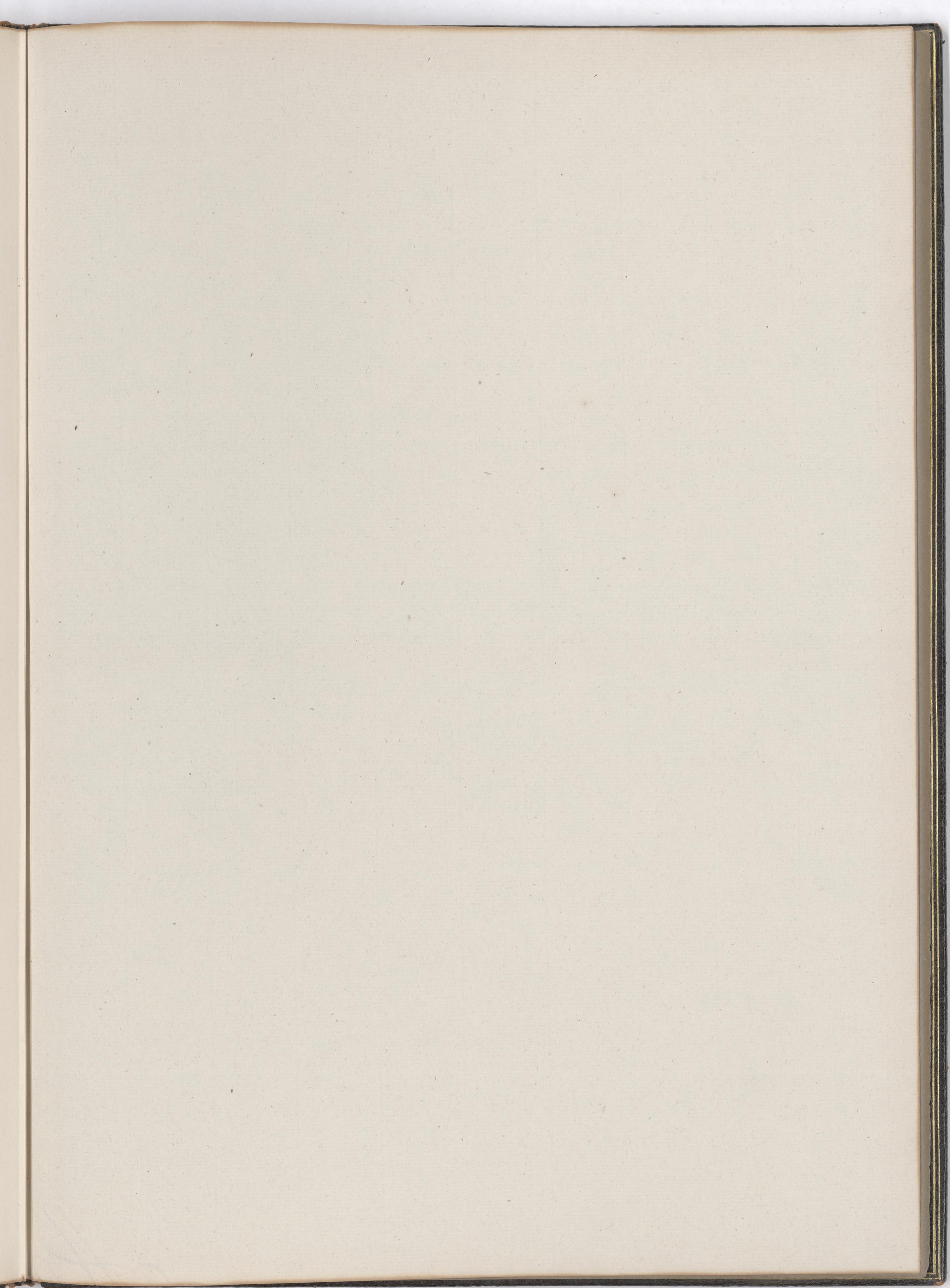












Jeremiah (14) 15 (16).

